

A NOTE ABOUT FLORISSANT FOSSIL INSECTS¹

F. Martin Brown²

ABSTRACT: The discoverer of the famous Oligocene fossil insect beds at Florissant, Colorado, has been moot. It now appears that Theodore Lutrell Mead first brought the fossil insects to scientific notice in 1871.

In 1909 T.D.A. Cockerell (p. 55) wrote at the end of his description of *Alepidophora pealei* (Diptera: Bombyliidae) "While I was preparing the above description, Dr. A.C. Peale, the discoverer of the Florissant shales, visited my laboratory...." Doubtlessly Cockerell was misled by Hayden's³ statements about the fossil beds. What few fossil specimens Peale collected constituted the third batch brought to the attention of scientists.

The earliest mention of fossil insects from the site is in the 5th Annual Report of the Geological Survey of the Territories, for 1872 p. 371, published in 1873. There it is noted that S.A. Allen collected some fossil plants and a few such insects at "South Park, near Costello's ranch". In the next Annual Report, the 6th, on p. 210 are the first descriptions of fossil plants from the shales, some of which Peale collected in 1873 along with a few insects.

The person who collected insect fossils in the Florissant area before any of Hayden's men were there was Theodore Lutrell Mead, a quasi-member of the Wheeler Surveys. It is understandable that Hayden made no mention of Mead. Hayden was feuding in Washington to remove the Army's Topographic Engineers from field surveying in the west. Mead was in between high school and college when he went to Colorado for his future father-in-law, William Henry Edwards, the man who contributed more to knowledge of the butterflies of North America than any other person.

Mead visited the Florissant fossil beds in September, 1871. The specimens he collected he sent to Edwards who in turn sent them to Samuel Hubbard Scudder in Cambridge, Mass. Scudder published on these in 1876, noting Mead as the collector but not giving any date of collection. Mead's only trip to Colorado was in 1871. Here is Mead's first-hand statement about collecting fossils, taken from a letter in the library of Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida.

¹Received March 26, 1981

²Wright-Ingraham Institute, Colorado Springs, Colorado

³Ferdinand V. Hayden was Chief of the United States Geological and Geographical Surveys of the Territories. This superceded the Wheeler Survey West of the 100th meridian and preceded the U.S. Geological Survey, of which Hayden was the second director.

The letter was started on September 13, 1871, at Mead's Station 39 on the road from Fairplay to Canyon City. It is addressed to his aunt in New York City, Mrs. S.B. Strang. The pertinent paragraph reads "I started this letter at Station 39. Before I had time to finish it I heard wonderful tales of petrified stumps and fossil insects, thirty miles away. So, I hired a horse and went there finding all as represented. I found nearly 20 insects and brought back about 25 lbs. of petrified wood. Some of the stumps are 20 ft. across. They are in all respects similar to ordinary stumps but converted to stone."

The next letter in Mead's copybook clinches the locality. It is to Mr. James Costello who operated the post-office and hostelry at Florissant in the late 1860s and early 1870s. In it Mead asks for the forwarding of some personal effects he had left behind. "Judge" Costello (spelled Castello by Scudder) owned a considerable ranch adjacent to a ranch owned by Adam Hill. Mead's reference to "20 ft. stumps" places the site on Hill's property. The large stump alluded to and Scudder's (1881: 283-284) trench are about a quarter mile north of the visitor's center of the Florissant Fossil Beds National Monument. It is not at all improbable that Mead dug his fossils from the same spot where Scudder later took thousands, a hundred yards or so southwest of the big stump.

The discoverer of the Florissant beds in Teller County, Colorado, is completely unknown. I suspect that it may have been Adam Hill on whose ranch Scudder developed his principle trench in 1877.

LITERATURE CITED

- Brown, F. Martin, 1971. Hayden's 1854-55 Missouri River Expedition. The Denver Westerners Roundup, 28, No. 3 pp. 3-66.
- Cockerell, Theodore Dru Alison, 1909. Descriptions of Tertiary Insects V. Some New Diptera. American J. Sci., (4) 27:53-58.
- Mead, Theodore Lutrell, ms. letters numbered 203 and 204, in copybook. The Library, Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida.
- Scudder, Samuel Hubbard. 1876. Fossil Coleoptera from the Rock Mountain Tertiaries. U.S. Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories, Bulletin 2: 77-78, 21 March 1876.
1881. The Tertiary Lake Basin of Florissant, Colorado, between South and Hayden Parks. U.S. Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories. Bulletin 6: 279-300. 1 pl.